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P **PROJECT**
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October/November 1993
Volume #151

Christian X. Hunter

ANGELS IN MANHATTAN

In Memory of Jim Brodey

JOHN GODFREY

Bluffalot in Flubbalo

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James Brodey, 1942-1993

Poet Jim Brodey died on 16 July 1993 in San Francisco of complications related to AIDS. For approximately the last two months of his life he resided in A Gift of Love Hospice. For several months he had been suffering from the neurological deteriorations associated with advanced AIDS disease. Two weeks prior to his death cerebral bleeding had begun, for which he declined treatment.

Brodey was born 30 November 1942 in Brooklyn and grew up in New York. He attended NYU and studied writing under Louise Bogan, who suggested he study at The New School, where at that time Frank O'Hara was teaching writing. Brodey in that way became personally acquainted with the poets of the "New York School" and the brilliance of his writing was recognized and encouraged. In 1966 he won the Dylan Thomas Poetry Prize at the New School. In 1968 he made a swing on the West Coast at a time when a number of poets from New York had settled in Bolinas in Marin County, California. He came back to New York, but returned to California for a longer sojourn in 1972. In 1975 he was back in New York, and but for a shorter trip West in 1977 he lived in New York, in the East Village and then in Queens, until the late 1980s. The end of that decade found him chained-up to crack, and the crack depredated him pretty tough. His life got shapeless, he lost his home and belongings, and landed up living in Tompkins Square Park. In 1991 he left for California one more time. He managed, with the help of friends in Marin and in San Francisco. By summer 1992 he became consistently clean and sober, but by then the disease began dictation. Through the Human Concern Center of Marin he became a counsellor to hospitalized AIDS patients. At this he excelled, and in the Fall of 1992 that organization awarded him as volunteer of the year.

Brodey was an avid follower of musical history, current, past, high and low. His knowledge of jazz and R & R and his various, occasionally lost, record collections are memorable. He wrote about music for *The East Village Other* and *Creem*, among

other publications. On several occasions he directed workshops at the Poetry Project, and his hours-long visits to fellow poets could, on a good day, be workshops in themselves. North America contains reams of collaborations aired-out during such visits. Brodey could be extremely sensitive to and appreciative of the poems of others, and his encouragement led many younger poets to publish and often edit their own magazines. He could be an intense and inspired friend. To friends he could be someone both inspiring and troubling. It was sometimes hard to tell where his gut throb left off and the chameleon began. Even his camouflage was significantly brighter than the background



Homeward Bound

as flames are drawn from the scuttle of turbine's roar,
the gypsy life processes from wads of bullets in plaster
where in darkness I can wander from, to be homeward
returning the poet, impolite among iambs,
to play with such a tangled living in breath out there.
O as feelings lift the line from the page
& throw the words like knives into a passing sideshow,
point-blank, the black rings of tape measure
mark off my despaire (audible) among the blurs
of lassoed sonatas in static air.
the shrubs multiply ranked & freckly sweat
miles of stretched palpitating flares are lit to amble,
I am meadow sweet in the torn & bloodied shirt
of my fathers, and the orangepeel sword-hilt
of my countrymen, who went this way, homeward bound
to blow the dust from my family crest, my cup.

1:3:67

—Jim Brodey

linoleum, however.

Brodey staked so much on his ability to create poems that to speak of the attributes of his writing would seem to trivialize the self-embodiment he projected into his works. All the same, jazz-like improvisation and spontaneity strike the reader, whether in honking aggressive modes or in the transparent lyrics he could also compose. He professes in his poems to give himself complete. It often appears that he exceeds his goal, whether the self of the moment be cynical or naive, sentimental or insouciant, erotic or bestial. There are times when I imagine that he modelled his art on Coltrane, Coleman, and Ayler combined, and then I recall that, in fact, he did. Problems exist where he

overpowers his own modest self-disciplinary equipment. There are poems of his in which the riot spills into the avenues of perception with a fitness that could not have been contrived, only to be interrupted by a few bars from an unworthy tune. I then scratch my head, pick unfriendly weapon-like things out of my intake passageways, and read on until the guy gets his grip back on the finer fervor. There are plenty of poems that are executed in sheer poetry speculation, and they work. There are really out works and sweet lonely lullabies. There are an awful lot of poems that couldn't possibly be improved upon. Here and there in some of his works, and throughout in the sizeable body of his best

work, Brodey fills out that bigger-than-life American poetry skin that isn't to be defined or described. What you do is recognize it for what it is, for who it is, and not be done with it, ever.

Brodey fronted a magazine, *Clothesline*, that put out one issue in 1966, and another in 1970. In the late 1970s he started up Jim Brodey Books which published his own *Piranha Yoga* (1978) and that was that. He fronted reading series a couple of times, I can't remember details. He fast-talked his way into a number of things, and often enough other poets got some kind of opportunity out of it.

It's not at all impossible to think of Brodey not being around anymore. It had got to be almost impossible for him to be around. His work wasn't appreciated widely enough, and his better qualities weren't either. I might go so far as to say he didn't treat his talents with enough respect. On the other hand, I'm not one to say a poet, of all people, should go around grateful, fercrissake, if s/he really has it. I know Brodey felt gratitude toward the universe for being allowed to taste of glorious inspirations, and his ambiguity of feeling toward poetry, his piety one moment and profanation the next, were totally cool by me. And maybe a lot of his hunger for glory led him to be ravaged by his desires and mistakes.

—John Godfrey, August 1993.

Brodey Bibliography

The following is a calculatedly abbreviated bibliography. His own-spun bibliographies of his work are amusing for some of the titles (*Zip Guns in the Haunted Mayonnaise*, 1970), but the works as such didn't appear as far as I know. Brodey's way with words sometimes became his way with facts.

Fleeing Madly South, Clothesline (1966).
Indentikit, Angel Hair (1967).
Long Distance Quote, Mustard Seed (1968).
Last Licks, Telephone Books (1973).
Blues of the Egyptian Kings, Big Sky (1975).
Unless, Jawbone (1977).
Piranha Yoga, Brodey Books (1978).
Judyism, United Artists (1980).

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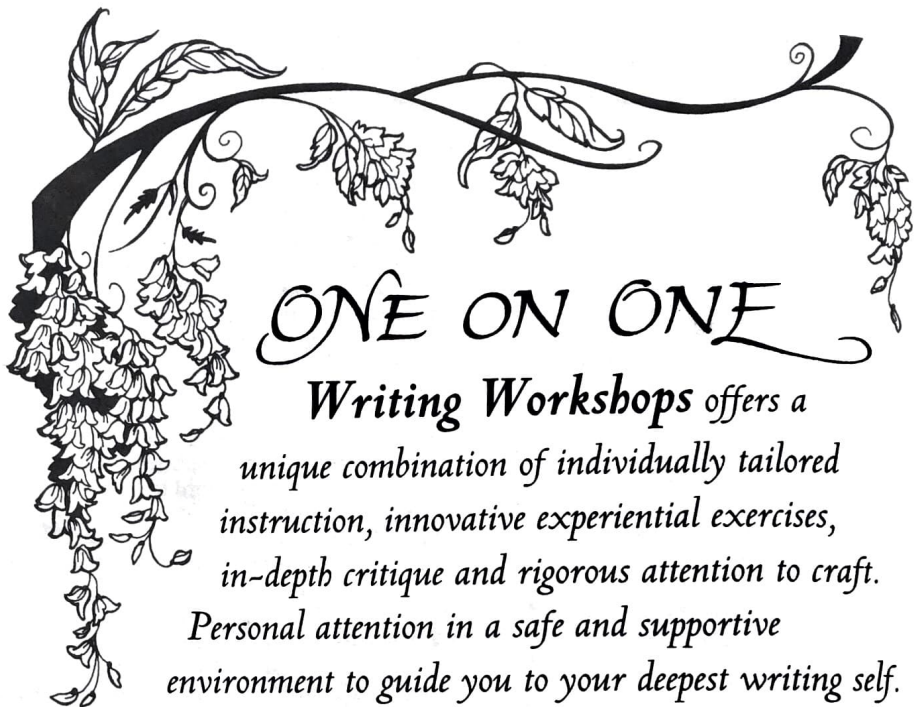
Jim Brodey composed collaborations with many fellow poets in their kitchens or in his, in some bedroom or bed or otherwise. If you turned your back on him during his visit to your home he might have written a poem longhand in the endpapers of a copy of his work that you own. He wrote a lot of letters and put a lot into them. Some persons may have tapes of his readings. Anyone with anything, regardless of face value, please send a copy or a letter of inquiry regarding possible duplications of material to:

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The India Book: Essays and Translations, Andrew Schelling, \$9.00. ISBN: 1-882022-14-9; \$10.00; 112 pages. The essays are interposed with translations from Sanskrit of erotic, Buddhist, and Hindu poetry which are enriched by the essays and also illuminate them. "... his translations and essays are, at last, opening the gates between experimental writing and that paradise of texts. Who knows how this will alter our own work?" (*Eliot Weinberger*) "Here is a sudden opening into a little-known world of poetics and an exquisite spiritual ferocity. The intersection of spiritual practice and our dancing universe is provisionally mapped here. This book is a tiny sip of some elder traditions that are nourished on essential fluids. Taste it." (*Gary Snyder*)

The Quietist, Fanny Howe, \$8.00. ISBN: 1-882022-12-2. Pottery. 32 pages with graphics by Italo Scanga. Elaine Equi comments: "Fanny Howe's writing is a form of active, attentive waiting. Rather than forcing meaning, her scrupulous vigil opens a clearing in which spirit announces and enunciates itself. ... process and struggle which lead to grace — 'Pure equilibrium amounting to Enough.'"



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Precisely the Point Being Made, Norman Fischer, Chax Press and O Books, \$10.00. 1-882022-14-9, 72 pages. Poetry. Michael Palmer writes about this work that it "offers rare evidence of a poet whose forms are everywhere vital and exploratory, are 'conscious of each breath.' ... an instrument of attention along the path one travels... Presence before the body and before though in all their illusoriness. A reader might then notice that the rest is silence." Kit Robinson comments "If Gertrude Stein were a Zen monk family man living on a farm by the ocean at the tail-end of the century, she would be Norman Fischer."

Letter to the editor

Rome, May 17, 93
 To the Editors, POETRY PROJECT,
 dear ones, I received your May-
 April 93 issue with such great pleasure.
 Jimmy's diaries beautiful and heartrend-
 ing, Rudy's photographs wonderful.

Just for the record please note that
 the old photo of me on page 12 is not in
 Perugia (Rudy and I were never there
 together) but it's in *AREZZO in 1947*.

Keep up with the marvellous work,
 Best wishes

Edith Schloss

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IN THE SHORT CENTURY

The Absence of Angels

by Christian X. Hunter

When I'd been working at the theater a little better than three months, my position was solid. I'd done my damndest to make myself seem invaluable and was then prepared to engage in some earnest larceny; but with no partner, all my schemes would continue to come up at least five fingers short. Then Elephant Head Teddy showed up in my life.

Teddy was this very unapproachable boy I passed each day in the hall at school. He could nearly always be found huddled in a corner with a group of older boys, ones that dressed with a dark shabby Faginesque elegance. Teddy, however, dressed strictly Mod: typically, a double-breasted jacket, black dress shirt with tiny white polka dots and small elegant ruffles at the cuff, a solid color tie, narrow cut pants with a slight flair at the bottom, and black vinyl boots with Cuban heels.

"600 Schools" like the one Ted and I attended in Brooklyn, have student bodies consisting mostly of last chance kids remanded there by the state because they're not disturbed enough to commit, too violent for public school classrooms, or in need of "special attention." In a school populated with Vinnies, Louies, Ginos and Sals from Redhook and East New York, a "dese, dems and doze" crowd prone to frequent outbreaks of spontaneous blood lust, one had to have something special just to make it from day to day without becoming a victim.

On rare days when no violence was offered, there still



Blues

The bed of the railway links me to these days of hell
The bed of the railway just one night can do everything

Love of the others you wear me out with great strokes of a hard
brush

In a station of Paris is there a true love that smiles?
In a station of Paris everything begins and everything ends.

Love of the others you suck the young blood of my life

And the words of my big brother I still hear them in my bed
And the words of my big brother is it possible to forget them?

Love of the others you are late in rewarding with promises.

So it'll be my child some people are never satisfied
So it'll be my child people win and lose all the time

Love of the others you put out my eyes by dint of fevers.

Goodbye is a handkerchief a big handkerchief of paper
That one throws in the sewer once it's been stained with tears

Love of the others you leave in my mouth a taste of clay.

—Pierre Martory
c. 1952

translated by the author and John Ashbery

remained the clear and present danger of being trapped in hour-long biology classes, stereophonically flanked by students with lethal-fumed hard salami sandwiches rotting away in grease spotted-paper bags atop their desks.

Amongst the population of hairy-fisted teenage misanthropes, Teddy who stood out like a strap-on in a shower full of nuns, had somehow achieved diplomatic immunity and was permitted to navigate unmolested through steady streams of multiple goon squads migrating from class to class. When he first introduced himself to me one morning in the boys' bathroom I was more than a little cautious.

I walked in on him that morning as he was lighting a joint, which he offered to me as if I'd been a life long friend, or a potential client. We smoked the jay as he rolled several more on top of a small black attaché that he always kept close by. It turned out that Ted's hands-off status at school resulted from his ability to score the sort of potent drugs and small firearms so plentiful on West 122nd Street, where he lived.

I told him how hard it was to stay awake in class after working nights till two and three a.m. I was trying to get him to ask me where I was working till two in the morning; it was, after all, a job worth bragging about. But Ted was more interested in my problem with staying awake. Turned out he had just what I needed: Speed, Black Beauties. And the price was right... but then it always is.

Already drawn by his style and the lure of an acquaintanceship that could potentially confer untouchable status upon me, I was further attracted by the fact that he'd been the first student I'd met who wasn't from the accursed boroughs. I had grown up a Manhattan Chauvinist, with nothing less than vehement disdain for the sort of low individuals that came by bus and train each weekend from Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island or the Bronx to infest my beloved Manhattan. My friendship with Izzy had been the rare exception.

Now, if one were to liken our 600 School to the Weimar Republic and the student body to Gestapo apes, then surely Ted and I were Cafe Americain owner Rick and Inspector Louie Renault walking down the foggy runway. It was the beginning of a beautiful, if twisted, friendship.

Ted told me that morning how we could see not one but three first run films of a different nature on 42nd Street for only seventy-five cents, but we'd have to get there before 11:00 a.m. Ted swallowed the roach and we headed to the street, stopping long enough to steal two new Totes umbrellas from the stand outside the administrator's office. Leaning in to stiff winds and steady rain, we headed down Willoughby Street and made for the IRT station.

As we stepped from the train to the platform at 42nd St., the station resounded with the splash and smell of icy water streaming down through the overhead street gratings. Squeaking rats swam among the candy wrappers floating in the brown phlegmy gutter water flooding the local tracks. On the stairs up to the station's mezzanine level, we were met head-on by a welcoming blast of humid air dense with the smell of brake-lining asbestos, roasting nuts, salty Nedicks hot dogs, popcorn, newsprint ink and damp wino wardrobes. Caught unprepared by the extended downpour, transves-

tite hustlers, Monte dealers, and pick-pockets—"the usual suspects"—crowded the length of the stairwell leading up to the street.

Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Ted asked. I mean, does the rain bring out the freaks, or is it the other way around?

As we climbed the last few steps to the street we saw the theater closest to the subway exit, the Victory, was running a triple bill that day. They were showing *Blue Carnival* with *For a Few Dollars More* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. We paid our seventy-five cents and had our tickets torn by a sleepy African usher with elaborate tribal scarring on his cheeks and forehead. Then we headed for the popcorn stand to buy armloads of junk-food.

Though I preferred the ground floor seats, we headed for the balcony because I was already a pack-and-a-half-a-day smoker. The cavernous ceilings and the echoey acoustics in the balcony seats of a Times Square movie house would always distract me, making it harder to escape in to the film. It's a problem that stems from my fear of heights, which always has me looking around to make sure the balcony, isn't moving, and while making my intermittent surveillance sweeps of the balcony I tend to fall prey to the irresistible pastime of people-watching.

A short while and several joints later, I was so entranced by Faye Dunaway that I hardly looked around at all. Later still as Clint Eastwood blazed away at the bad guys, accompanied by the great Morricone soundtrack, I came close to forgetting about the balcony altogether. I would have succeeded, too, if it weren't for Teddy constantly getting up to go to the bathroom. As the credits to *For a Few Dollars More* began to roll I was yawning and my eyes were tearing, so I took two of the Black Beauties to keep myself from nodding during the Danish film. Then, concerned they might not be strong enough, I took two more.

When *Blue Carnival*, a black and white soft-core film came on, Teddy excused himself for the twentieth time that day. I figured he was either sniffing dope or had a kidney infection and when I saw him pushing past the other patrons on his way back to his seat, I resolved to ask him which it was. Teddy was still two seats away when we heard an explosion coming from the direction of the men's room. On the screen, a rather severe-looking blond with a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth was coyly flirting with another actor while undressing behind a translucent wardrobe screen. None of the audience paid any attention to the noise.

Hey Ted, did that sound like a gunshot or what?

Ted pushed absentmindedly past the last two seats, his attention wholly focused

in the direction of the half-nude girl on the screen, then sat down, never looking away from the screen. He was settling in his seat and about to reply when there was a second explosion. This time a number of heads turned to look in the direction of the bathroom.

Nah, Ted said. Some guys are selling M-80s over by the men's room.

He said it loud enough that people in the rows in front and behind us heard it, and they quickly began passing this information amongst the other patrons. Two kids in yarmulkes over in the next row started quibbling over whether or not to use some of their lunch money to buy a few of the M-80s.

A few minutes later: Is this the most boring picture you've ever seen?

I didn't think so, but then I knew he was saying this for the benefit of those around him, the way people experiencing mild drug-induced paranoia are prone to do.

Uhh yeah, you know, Ted, I was thinking the same thing. Wanna split?

I'd wanted to use the men's room before leaving but decided not to mention it. Halfway down the stairs to the lobby we could see rotating cop car lights reflecting in the lobby mirrors. A group of six uniformed cops in heavy black raincoats, guns drawn pointed down, were cantering through the lobby in a formation that suggested a team of harnessed mules. When they met us near the bottom of the staircase, Ted's eyes met mine for a brief moment and I knew everything. The police, however, weren't looking for a chubby teenage schoolboy in a three piece suit, and they passed us on the stairs without a glance.

As we stood under the marquee opening our umbrellas, more squad cars arrived. A detective with a gold shield hanging on a chain around his neck gave us a brisk escort away from the theater. We were back on the street, heading east in the rain. Just before Sixth Avenue we entered a Merit Farms, still high and hungry once more.

Ted and I loaded up trays with grayish-brown potato pancakes, tubs of applesauce, sweet overcooked ears of corn dripping with butter, troughs of macaroni salad, and king-size containers of generic root beer with artificial licorice-like flavoring. We found a table in the back and Ted dug in instantly. I... had to have a cigarette first.

So... what exactly just happened? I mean, was that a gun you just sold?

Ted peered over his corn on the cob, sighed, stopped chewing, and gave me a hard serious look that verged on disdain. For a moment I thought I'd committed some horrendous faux pas and nearly began to apologize. Then the corners of his mouth curled up into an impossibly

devious smile. In his low husky voice he told me:

Hey man, as a rule, I don't sell to anyone hot for revenge. They're the ones who'll all of sudden decide to decide to take you off also. Too many of them want to get even with the whole world. I sold it to him with the chambers empty. Shit! I had no idea he had bullets with him.

As he spoke, I could feel the four Black Beauties kicking in. For a few moments there was an achey feeling in my joints, and then it passed. I was slipping into a state of hyper acuity and flatline calm, the twilight corridor where crank dreamers detach from time, where once certain foundations begin to seethe and shift as stone turns to sand below the structures of rational thought, where the orthodox plot synopsis vanishes in sewer shadows, like a Times Square rip-off artist pocketing that last ten dollars, which for a brief moment had belonged to some out-of-town junkie last seen trying to rock himself to sleep in a doorway in the rain over on Seventh Avenue.

I found myself staring at the food on my tray and wondering what the fuck I was thinking when I'd bought all that food. It didn't matter. The world around us appeared to have gone to sleep. Everything seemed to be covered with a field of television static. Ted and I were the only two people awake in New York. I had found my new partner.

(The preceding is excerpted from a novel-in-progress. Christian X. Hunter will be reading at the Poetry Project on Nov. 12)

Sequence

"setting" that is to say
(doors) looking out
at light, etc.
as interruption, the street
in the photograph she continues
(shadow)
coming to the man in conversation
with himself, another view
(nothing) connected
before the diagram of sex
—nervous—is found unconscious
in place of the character
she means who isn't
deserved, her
number in that case stopped

—Stephen Ratcliffe

HARD PRESS

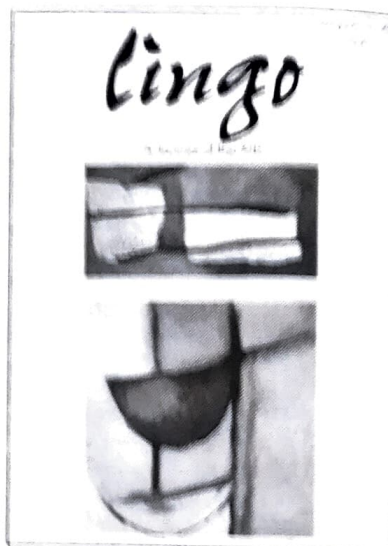
Books & Periodicals

lingo 1 \$10.00 **A Journal of the Arts**

A feature interview with Bernadette Mayer plus an excerpt from her forthcoming book *The Desires Of Mothers To Please Others In Letters*. A selection from *My Life In The Early Nineties* by Lyn Hejinian. A selection from Clark Coolidge's *City in Regard*. Poetry and photos from *Reconstruction* by Fanny Howe and Ben Watkins. Plus new work by Rosmarie Waldrop, John Ashbery, Eileen Myles, Bill Corbett and others.

Translations include: the complete text of Edmond Jabès' *A Foreigner Carrying In The Crook Of His Arm A Tiny Book*; a selection from Arkadii Dragomoshchenko's *Phosphor*. New translations of Jacques Roubaud, Elke Erb, Dominique Fourcade, Peter Waterhouse, and Pierre Martory.

Essays include: "Jazz on Video" by Peter Occhiogrosso and Geoffrey Young on Kenneth Goldsmith's text art. A 16-page color portfolio including Win Knowlton, Reginald Madison, Jim Youngerman, and Strombotne.



lingo 2 \$10.00 **Fall 1993**

A feature interview with John Ashbery. James Schyler's letters. *Gaston and Nixon* by William Corbett (drawings by Philip Guston). A talk by Barbara Guest. Poems by Bernadette Mayer, Barbara Guest, Clark Coolidge, Rosmarie Waldrop, Michael Gizzi, Marjorie Welsh, David Shapiro and many more. In translation: Edmond Jabès, Marcel Cohen, Jean Frémon, Elke Erb and others.

A color portfolio including Trevor Winkfield, Darragh Park, and Barbiero Barros Gizzi. Photos and poetry from *The Berlin Book* by John Yau and Bill Barrette. Essays on music, art and film including more "Jazz on Video" and an interview with Leroy Jenkins by Peter Occhiogrosso. Ron Padgett on Trevor Winkfield, and Gus Blaisdell on Carroll Dunham.

Available Fall 1993

Lowell Connector \$10.95 **By Clark Coolidge, Michael Gizzi, and John Yau.**
Photographs by Bill Barrette.

Three poets collaborate while making the rounds in Kerouac's Lowell. "What do you see if you walk in a place where explosive acts of imagination once had their source? And then what further acts are possible? . . . We were attracted here to find out. . . Perhaps we thought to Geiger up some remnant bits from the rubble of Jack's Lowell. . ."

September 1993

The Desires Of Mothers To Please Others In Letters \$12.95



By Bernadette Mayer

A monumental St. Bernadette to the initiates, this work has achieved something like the status of "Manuscript Classic." An epistolary text which takes as its formal parameters the nine months of Ms. Mayer's last pregnancy — an augury by bee sting — and writes the reader's psyche to the fences. "She is a consummate poet no matter what's for supper or who eats it. Would that all poems were as generous." — Robert Creeley. By the author of *The Bernadette Mayer Reader*, *Sonnets*, and *Studying Hunger*.

January 1994

Available at bookstores or direct from
Hard Press
PO Box 184, West Stockbridge, MA 01264

Dirt by Gillian McCain

Rumor has it that our beloved **Tony Towle** is going through the preliminary tests to be on *Jeopardy*. **Duncan Hannah** at the **Female Rock Writers** reading: "I like women, I like rock, I like writing." Conversation between **Marcella Harb** and **Ed Friedman** over Japanese food: Marcella: "I met **Fielding Dawson** when I was 17." Ed: "You were in jail?" Rumor has it our former intern **John Greb** has a book coming out on **Leslie Scalapino's** O Books. Best sweetest book of 1993: **Ron Padgett's** remembrance of **Ted Berrigan**. Our own newsletter editor **Jordan Davis** has become famous as the poet at work on a manuscript of one million poems—*The Wall Street Journal* wrote a story on him, the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* interviewed him, now all he has to do is write thirty poems a day and pray for a long life. Boston's own **Dark Room Collective** has started a literary journal called *Muleteeth*. The first issue is due in October and will include poetry, fiction, prose, visual art and essays by **Clarence Major**, **Harryette**

Mullen, **Ntozake Shange**, **Al Young** and others. **Christian X. Hunter** finished his novel, *The Absence of Angels*. Every excerpt I've heard him read has been amazing. Look out for him at the **Three Authors in Search of a Publisher** reading on November 12th. There was a celebration at Wetlands for **Merry Fortune's** new collection, *Living With a White Girl*. Performers included **Foamola**, **Homer Erotic**, **Drunken Boat**, **Mellow Freakin' Woodies**, **Maggie Estep** and **Marcella Harb**. The magazine includes interviews with **Wanda Phipps** and **Penny Arcade**. I spotted angstmeister **Henry Rollins** at the **Leonard Cohen** concert back in May. Cohen, who unlike the aforementioned, can get away with an abundance of death references, was his usual elegant zen-master self. When the audience was screaming between songs, he leaned into the mike and dead-panned, "Thank you for your modest ecstasy." So cool, so sexy, so mature, I'd marry him in a nanosecond. Speaking of incredible **Canadians**, please come see Toronto-

based poet **Lynn Crosby** read here on November 3rd. The title poem of her book, *Miss Pamela's Mercy* (Coach House Press) is dedicated to the illustrious **Pamela Des Barres**, and Pamela is obviously a big fan of Lynn's work because she wrote the blurb on the back cover. Crosby will be reading with two of my favorite poets, **David Trinidad** and **Jeffery Conway**. Jeffery recently wrote a brilliant prose piece called "**Death of a New Wave Gay**" which is yet to be published, so if you see him beg him for a xerox. Today I got an "anonymous" letter in the mail with **real dirt** typed on the back. It was a "Charlotte's Web" gossip column from *The N.Y. Daily News* dated August 9th. Allegations are being made by *New Philistine* editor **K. Wencelas** that **Tama Janowitz** was actually born **Tom A. Janowitz**. Wencelas supports his/her thesis with a variety of facts based on library research, and apparently when the *Daily News* called Janowitz, she responded through her spokesperson: "It's very personal and I don't feel that it's anybody's business." Whatever, the whole thing is weird & intriguing enough to make me fork out \$5 for a five-issue subscription to *New Philis-*

tine Magazine (c/o K. Wencelas, 5440 Cass #1006, Detroit, MI 48202). Do you think Wencelas is friends with the **Motorbooty** people? **Shannon Ketch** has started a new lit/art magazine called **Monster Trucks**. The new *World* (# 47) is out with works by **Sherman Alexie**, **Wang Ping**, **Jo Ann Wasserman** and others. **Johnny Casser** is recording songs by **Nick Cave** and **Tom Waits**. **Richard Hell** was in Australia this summer doing readings. Excellent article in the July/August issue of *Option* magazine entitled "**Desolation Angels: The Misfits of Women's Lit.**" Written by **Holly George-Warren**, it is the first article on the "spoken blurb" [sic] movement that didn't make me squirm. Warren is a good journalist who has done her research well, placing the beginning of the punk poetry woman's movement here at the **Patti Smith** gave her first reading. Her article features L.A. poets **Debbie Patino**, **Pleasant Gehman**, **Julie Ritter**, **Marisela Norte**, **Angela Coon** and **Exene Cervenka**. I was in **Nova Scotia** and **New Brunswick** all summer, where I didn't go to a single reading

(See *DIRT*, p. 11)

Writhings of a Nude Ghost:

A Report from the Buffalo Festival of New Poetry, by Tony Door

What follows is a bunch of gripping & carping by a typical New York Poetry type, on what was essentially a worthwhile & noteworthy endeavor, whose only real flaw was that though the possibilities, potentialities, & ramifications of this confluence were many, i for one have unfortunately heard nothing from nor of it but a few vague peeps.

Let me begin, for those of you who have not yet forgotten that you were not invited & therefore did not attend, by describing how the *skene* was set. In a rather large, comfortable room, filled with your typical Academic Library sofas & chairs, about 75 to 80 rather groggy looking persons {at least 50 of them men} gathered together late in the morning on April Fools Day, 1993. Cups of bad coffee in hand, they waited for the first rumble from that first poet in

this now officially contextualized conference. As i looked around me, thinking to categorize & observe, i saw:

★Five men who hadn't bothered to shave
★Four men with beards
★Three men with mustaches & goatees
★Two men with hipster 70s side-burns
★One man with Tom Waits style facial hair
★Seven women wore their long hair down
★Six women wore glasses
★Five men glued their hair in place with mousse
★Four men wore their long hair in ponytails
★Three women had very short hair
★Three men had buzz cuts
★Three women wore very red lips
★Three men wore ties
★Two men wore denim jackets
★One woman wore a dress
★One woman had dyed her hair "red"
★Five men over the age of 35 decided to attend
★Four men had baseball caps on their heads
★Three women also wore base-

ball caps
★Two men wore regular hats
★Three men dressed in "tweedy" professorial sport coat attire {leathern patches intact}
★Two men dressed for the late 60s were in attendance
★One woman dressed for the late 60s also came
★One man in a leather jacket from the early 80s with zippers all over it argued philosophically about prescience &
★One man had on a short, very fashionable, navy monkey jacket with a Lenin pin on the lapel.

And the events themselves: The untimidatable Lee Ann Brown publishing the unpublished in the library of time. Who, upon singing a song about fairies during a panel discussion on the Ethics of Small Press Publishing, was chastised for not being solemn enough, by someone who probably should have known better.

From the man who has everything, the heroic Algonquin fig-

ure of [cf2785@albanyums.bitnet] Chris {he who carries his} Funkhouser {on his back}, passing out cassette tapes, cd's & his bitnet address like candy to babies. Who challenged the whole conference with the immediacy of the egalitarianism of his poetry as music for everyone, & the unintentional elitism of his live by the modem die by the modem future of poetry as an electronic medium. An idea, which, although appropriately utopian, i for one cannot really afford to make manifest at this moment in my life.

A most maligned & neglected joke: Potato as Rhizome was presented, to all those willing to brave the arduous journey {"Who are these guys? I'm tired."}, to the Media Lab, by John Byrum, during the Alternative Modes & Media reading.

(To be continued)

PUBLICATIONS

BOOKS AND MAGAZINES RECEIVED

BOOKS

Collected Poems, James Schuyler; Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993. 423 pages. \$35 cloth.

Edwin's Tao, Being a Rough Translation of Selections from Lao Tze's Tao Teh Ching by Edwin Denby, Intro. by William Mackay; Crumbling Empire Press, 1993. 13 pages.

Hotel Lambosa, Kenneth Koch; Coffee House, 1993. 151 pages. \$10.95 paper.

Untapped Maps, Maureen Owen; Potes & Poets, 1993. 87 pages. \$9.50 paper.

Ted, A Personal Memoir of Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett; The Figures, 1993. 99 pages. \$10 paper.

Blood Work, Ron Padgett; Bamberger, 1993. 104 pages. \$12 paper.

Iovis, Anne Waldman; Coffee House, 1993. 336 pages. \$15 paper.

Troubairitz, Anne Waldman; Fifth Planet, 1993. 60 pages. \$10 paper.

Djbot Baghostus's Run, Nathaniel Mackey; Sun & Moon Press, 1993. 204 pages. \$12.95 paper.

Casting Sequences, Marjorie Welsh; U. Georgia Press, 1993. 77 pages.

Amblyopia, Jena Osman; Avenue B, 1993. 42 pages. \$8 paper.

The Garment in Which No One Had Slept, Pam Rehm; Burning Deck, 1993. 62 pages. \$8 paper.

Dracontic Nodes, Cydney Chadwick; Texture Press, 1993. 12 pages. \$4 paper.

A Lesson in Music, Jean Daive, tr. Julie Kalendek; Burning Deck, 1993. 62 pages. \$6 paper.

New York, Michael Gottlieb; The Figures, 1993. 93 pages. \$10 paper.

The Boundary of Blur, Essays, Nick Piombino; Roof, 1993. 122 pages. \$13.95 paper.

Virtual Reality, Bob Perelman; Roof, 1993. 80 pages. \$9.95 paper.

Waves of Ice, Waves of Rumor, Dennis Barone; Zasterle, 1993. 31 pages.

Numbers & Tempers: Selected Early Poems, Ray Dpalma; Sun & Moon Classic 24, 1993. 170 pages. \$11.95 paper.

What the Water Gave Me, Tania Elizov; Fifth Planet, 1993. 46 pages. \$10 paper.

To Speak While Dreaming, Eleni Sikelianos; Selva Editions, 1993. 79 pages. \$8 paper.

The Nonconformist's Memorial, Susan Howe; New Directions, 1993. 192 pages. \$12.95 paper.

River City Rhapsody, Poem for the Inauguration of Freeman Bosley Jr. as Mayor of St. Louis, Mo., April 20, 1993, Word Seed Ensemble; Drumvoices, 1993.

West of Mass, Jim McCrary; Tansy Press, 1993. 76 pages. \$8 paper.

WRITING WORKSHOPS AT THE POETRY PROJECT

poetry. IN . performance

Taught by Edwin Torres. Thursdays at 7 pm (October 20th through the end of December). Exploring the communication of poetry in performance, participants will play with ways to think about the language of what we do. Active participation and guest artists will be part of the journey.

Edwin Torres is a poet and performer who received the Nuyorican Poet Cafe's First Annual Prize for Fresh Poetry. He is the author of *I Hear Things People Haven't Really Said*.

Poetry Writing Workshop

Taught by Kimberly Lyons. Fridays at 7 pm (October 21 through the end of December). Participants will investigate a practice of reception: experiments, assignments, journals and shared response. In reading the city and preparing our attention, attunement occurs. Participants will develop uses for dalliance, interference, dictation and ecology of materials. New and more experienced writers welcome.

Kimberly Lyons is the author of *In Padua* and *Oxygen*. Her work has appeared in *Sentience*, *Black Bread*, the anthology *Out of This World* and has work forthcoming in *o.blek*.

Editing The World

Taught by Lewis Warsh. Saturday at noon (October through the end of April). The workshop will collaborate on editing and producing three issues of *The World*, the literary magazine of the Poetry Project. All participants will be contributing editors responsible for gathering work for the magazine. Discussion will center on the politics and ethics of editing; poems by workshop members will be scrutinized as well. Interested participants are required to send five poems to *The World* c/o The Poetry Project.

LIFE AND DEATH

Robert Creeley's selection of Charles Olson's poems deletes the undeclared mayoral candidate and presents the poet. The phrase "Blueberry America"! grandeur, not grandiose.

New books by Kenneth Koch, Ron Padgett, Maureen Owen, Marjorie Welish, Jena Osman, Pam Rehm, & Jean Daive to read.

Announcing *Skylab*, a magazine. Send manuscripts c/o me here. I'll be better about mail.

That's all our financial situation permits me to say. Next time, a garland of reviews of James Schuyler's *Collected Poems*. The section of new poems, verily I say to those of you who have each of the books, is real news. As is Billy Mackay's save of Denby's Tao: "crumbling empire creates loyal people."

—Jordan Davis

DIRT (continued from p.9)

but found some great books at yard sales: **Viva's** *The Baby*, **Rochelle Owens's** *I Am the Babe of Joseph Stalin's Daughter*, and **Mandy Rice-Davies's** *My Life & Lovers*. Please come to the **Poetry Project at Fez** readings on Tuesday nights in September. Call here or the Fez for more information.. Bye.

A SHEEP ON THE BUS[®]

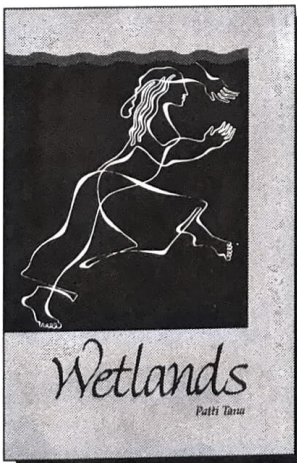
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Sharon Glassman - Mike Tyler
Christian X Hunter - Linda Yablonsky
David Cameron - Robert Roth - Jeff Morris
Sharon Mesmer - Penny Arcade - Edwin Torres
The Mellow Freakin Woodies

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POETRY



Patti
Tana

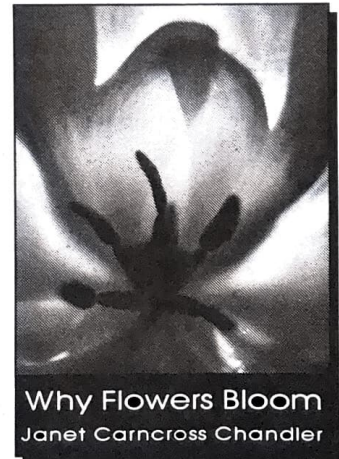


WETLANDS

This collection of poems and stories tells of a young girl's journey to womanhood. From a child sledding in the snow or skimming stones on the river to an adult dancing by the ocean in the moonlight, Tana relates the power of water as an element in our lives. Complemented by the serene endless line drawings of Alfred Van Loen, *Wetlands* is a collection that affirms life and inspires personal reflection.

0-918949-35-1 Paper \$8; -36-X Cloth \$12

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Chandler



WHY FLOWERS BLOOM

These poems share the many joys, frustrations, and sorrows of the long and full life of a woman now in her eighties. Writing is a wonderful tool that Chandler takes full advantage of as she faces daily and lifelong milestones: moving into a retirement home, starting a writer's workshop for women, and turning eighty. There is never a dull moment in this lively story of a still young older woman - older, but never old.

0-918949-37-8 Paper \$8; -38-6 Cloth \$12



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THE CALENDAR OF THE POETRY PROJECT

THE POETRY PROJECT LTD. AT
ST. MARK'S CHURCH IN-THE-BOWERY

OCTOBER

1 PAUL WILLIAMS & CINDY LEE BERRYHILL

Founder of the first U.S. rock magazine, *Crawdaddy!* (newly revived), Paul Williams is the author of twenty books including his most recent, *Rock and Roll: The 100 Best Singles*. A founder of the N.Y. anti-folk scene, San Diego-based Cindy Lee Berryhill has two albums: *Who's Gonna Save the World?* and *Naked Movie Star* (both Rhino). **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

4 OPEN READING.

Hosted by Wanda Phipps. Sign-up 7:30. **Monday, 8 p.m.**

6 CHARLES NORTH & TONY TOWLE

The author of six collections of poetry, Charles North's most recent book is *The Year of the Olive Oil*. Tony Towle is the author of nine books, most recently a collection of poetry and prose, *Some Musical Episodes* (both Hanging Loose Press). **Wednesday, 8 p.m.**

8 JOHN YAU ON ANDY WARHOL

Art critic & poet John Yau will talk on the Pop King in celebration of his new book, *In the Realm of Appearances: The Art of Andy Warhol*. **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

11 JENNIFER CLEMENT & JESSICA TREAT

Founder of the Mexico-based Tramontane Poetry Group, Jessica Clement's poetry has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*. Mary Gaitskill describes Jessica Treat's work as "rigorous and sensual, dream-like and resolutely cerebral."

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ADMISSION \$5 (CONTRIBUTION) EXCEPT WHERE NOTED. ALL PROGRAMS SUBJECT TO CHANGE.



1 OPEN READING.

Hosted by Wanda Phipps. Sign-up 7:30. **Monday, 8 p.m.**

3 LYNN CROSBY, JEFFERY CONWAY & DAVID TRINIDAD

Toronto poet Lynn Crosby is the author of *Miss Pamela's Mercy* (Coach House Press). Jeffery Conway is a poet whose work has appeared in *The Brooklyn Review*, *James White Review* and *Blue Boy*. David Trinidad's most recent book is *Hand Over Heart: Poems 1981-1988*; his next, *Answer Song*, will be published by High Risk/Serpent's Tail in Fall 1994. **Wednesday, 8 p.m.**

5 DREAM WEAVERS

Poets read their Jungian technicolor yawns. Spontaneous interpretations welcome from the audience. Douglas Rothschild, Bernadette Mayer, David Vogen, Serena Siegfried, Shannon Ketch, Michael Blitz, Andy Alper, Paul Schulz, Nicole Blackman, Sparrow & more. **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

8 FRANZ KAMIN & NINA ZIVANCEVIC

Franz Kamin's performances of fairy tales with funkatood often include as many as ten people reading texts, his own hyper-hypnotic voice, flutes and even mimes. His published works include *Hotel* and *Scribble Death*. His recordings include *Scribble Music Sampler*. Nina Zivancevic was born in Belgrade (formerly in Yugoslavia) and has lived in the U.S., England, France and West Africa. She has seven books of poetry published and a book of short stories, *Inside & Out of Byzantium*, is forthcoming from Semiotext(e). **Monday, 8 p.m.**

10 KENWARD ELSLIE & STEVEN TAYLOR

A poet, composer and musician, Kenward Elmslie's books include *The Alphabet Work* and *26 Bars* (with Donna Dennis). A member of the band the False Prophets, Steven Taylor has played with Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman and others. They will be performing a work entitled *Postcards on Parade*. **Wednesday, 8 p.m.**

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13 ROCHELLE OWENS & JAYNE CORTEZ

A poet and playwright, Rochelle Owens's *Paysanne and Selected Earlier Poems 1961-1988* is forthcoming. The author of eight books, Jayne Cortez's most recent work is *Poetic Magnetic*. **Wednesday, 8 p.m.**

15 TRAVEL DIARIES

Tales and slides from wacky journeys: Harold Goldberg, Gillian McCain, Pagan Kennedy & Todd Colby. **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

18 TWO PLAYS BY DENNIS MORITZ

Directed by Dennis Davis, featuring Maxine Martin and Danielle Reddick. Dennis Moritz will present *White Mouse/Adelaide in the Pilot House Talks About Love* and *Metamorphoses, The Movie*, two of the 27 plays he has created during his 20 years of working in the theatre. **Monday, 8 p.m.**

20 DIANE GLANCY & MARIA IRENE FORNES

Of Cherokee and German/English heritage, Diane Glancy is a fiction writer, poet, essayist and National Book Award recipient. Maria Irene Fornes is a playwright whose distinguished plays include *Fefu and Her Friends*. **Wednesday, 8 p.m.**
This is the first of five National Literary Tour readings, supported by a grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

22 PATERSON EAST SIDE GHOST WRITERS

Eight poets from Paterson East Side High School rap, rock and rant. Curated by Cindy Mamakous and Reg E. Gaines. **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

25 ANGELA LUKACIN & NATASHA FEARLESS LIEDER

Angela Lukacin will be presenting *Twisted Tutu*, her new work-in-progress, which she describes as a vaudevillian chorus line of "Go-Go Goddesses." Natasha Fearless Lieder is a visual artist, actress and torch poetess. Her "fearless lieder" will be accompanied by Maceo McLean Gilchrist, who's performed with Dinah Washington, Art Pepper and Ornette Coleman. **Monday, 8 p.m.**

27 JEROME ROTHENBERG, PIERRE JORIS & KURT SCHWITTERS

The author of over 50 books of poetry, Jerome Rothenberg's most recent book is *Khurbn & Other Poems*. Pierre Joris is a poet and translator whose most recent book is *Turbulence*. Rothenberg and Joris collaborated on the recently published *ppppp: Selected Writings of Kurt Schwitters*. **Wednesday, 8 p.m.**

29 SILVIA SANZA, LYNNE TILLMAN & DAVID VERONESE

A fiction reading by authors published by Serpent's Tail Press. Silvia Sanza is the author of *Alex Wants to Call It Love* and *Twice Real*. Lynne Tillman is the author of *Motion Sickness, Cast in Doubt* and others. Jana is David Veronese's first novel. **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

His published works include *Hotel* and *Scribble Death*. His recordings include *Scribble Music Sampler*. Nina Zivancevic was born in Belgrade (formerly in Yugoslavia) and has lived in the U.S., England, France and West Africa. She has seven books of poetry published and a book of short stories, *Inside & Out of Byzantium*, is forthcoming from Semiotext(e). **Monday, 8 p.m.**

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12 THREE AUTHORS IN SEARCH OF A PUBLISHER

The future of fiction. Chris Simunek will read excerpts from his novel *No Easter*, Christian X. Hunter from *The Absence of Angels* and Linda Yablonsky from *Diaries of a Nicotine Queen*. **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

15 JUDITH REN-LAY & REBECCA MOORE

Judith Ren-Lay is a dancer/singer/choreographer/poet. The *L.A. Times* calls Ren-Lay "an urban griot" and *The New York Times* says "she's an explorer whose undiscovered country is life itself." Rebecca Moore is an actress/singer/songwriter who has worked with John Jesrun and Ridge Theatre. She spends her half of the evening wrestling with her guitar and a wayward bunch of words. **Monday, 8 p.m.**

17 SONIA SANCHEZ & ALEXIS DE VEAUX

A poet and activist, Sonia Sanchez is the author of thirteen books including *Homegirls and Handgrenades* and most recently, *Under a Soprano Sky*. Alexis De Veaux is a poet, writer, essayist, playwright and political activist whose books include *Spirits in the Streets* and *Don't Explain: A Song of Billie Holiday*. **Wednesday, 8 p.m.**
The second of five National Literary Tour readings, supported by a grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

19 LADY RAIN: A MONOLOGUE FROM DEATH ROW

Directed by Thomas Palumbo and performed by John Michael Bolger, both from the Actor's Studio. The author, Stephen Wayne Anderson, is currently on death row in San Quentin. **Friday, 10:30 p.m.**

22 SENSITIVE SKIN MAGAZINE READING

A reading celebrating the new issue of *Sensitive Skin*, a NYC-based nationally distributed mag featuring off-the-wall, over-the-top, on-the-edge art and literature by new and established artists and writers. Readings by Buddy Kold, Christian X. Hunter, Wanda Phipps, Carl Watson and others. **Monday, 8 p.m.**

29 SHANNON KETCH & CAROLYN PEYSER

Shannon Ketch was born in Marshalltown, Iowa in a house. His books include *You Are Disgruntled You Do Not Want To Be Hived, Thanksgiving*, and *Being University* (Evil Clown Books). He'll be performing his work with a film by Jim Spring and live music by Drunken Boat's Steve Gross. P.R. Director at Poets House, Carolyn Peyser is a member of The Stoop (the literary collective of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe) and is currently working on poetry projects for PBS and the Knitting Factory. **Monday, 8 p.m.**

NOVEMBER

REVIEWS

FANNY HOWE

Saving History

Sun & Moon, 1993, 222 pp., \$12.95 paper.

Fanny Howe's novels inspire questions of tradition and expectation and the ways of subverting the traditional form of the genre without sacrificing or giving up on characters and stories. She presents us with worlds in which people interact, develop as characters within a kind of chronology, wreak harm on themselves and others, without compromising her responsibility to open the form to a sense of revelation that advances us (as historians of the novel) into the future. The tension between giving and taking away is resolved by moving the center beyond the frame of anticipation so that there's no way of ever knowing whether the structure is going to collapse back onto itself (a journey to the interior) or spiral outwards to something that resembles a synthesis of all the possibilities that came before.

Yet the recognizable, the plot and characters, especially in her most recent novel, *Saving History*, never seems to be the whole point, and the most sublime writing in the book is in the occasional series of italicized passages which dispense with even the fragmented notion of plot structure:

I only want you to know that the bread of heaven feeds the poor human soul, begging only to be nourished in peace. Waste water is recycled into drinking water. There are lots of wonderful Americans out there whose self-hatred takes the form of rejecting immi-

grants. The sky is teeming with hidden blue machinery. And each act is the signature of thought, especially the sign of the cross.

It's at this point that the reader emerges as therapeutic collaborator to create the linkages between surface consciousness and dream and to realize that up to now the author has been auditioning us as audience by presenting a disguised form of writing (you can call it a novel, if you want, but now I'm going to change it into something "other"). Howe creates tension and intensity by the manipulation of the plot which always seems on the verge of breaking down and vanishing

• • •

Commercial Break

Take care of values. The rest is shopping, raiding the islands for what little coral they possess.

Tell me... You opted for the shrimp cocktail. I have no more sand in my shoes. The witch squints at the fire.

—John Ashbery

totally. This tension, and its relief, is also a source of pleasure, the incremental drift over surfaces that appear real, with real references to a realistic universe, and then the sudden plunge into a net of words that function themselves as a world of their own.

As she did in an earlier novel, *The Deep North*, Howe uses the paragraph as a unit—either one sentence or several sentences at a time, with space around the whole. Paragraph equals section, the space between equals the passage of time. Anything can happen from paragraph to paragraph, including a shift in pronouns, from "I" to "he" or "she." This shift sometimes takes place within the paragraph itself, another way of slipping out of the center, of blurring the focus, of holding the reader on an anticipatory edge.

Other novelists who often approach this possibility are Virginia Woolf and the great Jeanette Winterson, but neither give as much of their process as Howe does, nor let the reader see so intimately the mesh of their disguises.

As a multi-dimensional work, *Saving History* can be read as a meditation on loving without condition, of denying love, of working through psychological states to discover the illusion of change and love, of spiritual love and emotional absence, familial love, the notion of saintliness in a world where people only care about themselves, of sexual love where physical bodies seem to exist in proximity to one another but rarely touch, of love based on experience and what happens when you keep making the same mistakes, of loving someone who lacks a conscience, of absorbing pain and abuse, of letting go. "I want to understand," she writes, "why a woman would try so hard to please a man who was cold and unkind." This leads to the question: "Is it human nature to crave the love of indifferent people?" Howe's method of presenting plot depends on the often interrupted monologues that give us a character's past in

a series of quick takes. That people have the capacity to change, to avoid the temptation of staying rooted in their damaged selves as a kind of life-long excuse, is part of the tradition of the novel (characters evolving through time) that Howe attempts to preserve. She treats content as a long hard look at what otherwise might seem obvious and in this way she's very much the visionary realist, intent on communicating a recognizable human future. Even the title serves as a commentary on the nature of the novel as a genre rooted in history that has to be both preserved and changed. What makes her writing special is the sense of rapture which defies and transcends the normal interchange between innocence and wisdom. "It would be a strange person," she says, "who did

not know that suffering is a way to stay alive." Reading *Saving History* is like being locked in a loving embrace.

—Lewis Warsh

BRAD GOOCH

City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara

Knopf, 1993, 532 pp., \$30 cloth.

Brad Gooch's *City Poet*, a first biography of the poet Frank O'Hara (1926-1966), is also an extremely informative gossip-survey of the social and sexual mores of the New York avant garde art scene of the Fifties and Sixties.

Indeed, at times this book resembles a slightly out-of-focus photo in which the background comes out sharper than the foreground figure. Somewhere around the middle O'Hara seems to get lost in the sheer abundance of juicy but sometimes redundant or even irrelevant information about the doings of his glamorous surrounding cast.

Gooch, a poet, novelist and slick-magazine journalist (*Vanity Fair*, *Harp-er's Bazaar*), knows the territory. He was a Columbia College student of Kenneth Koch, who, along with O'Hara, John Ashbery and James Schuyler, made up a group of poets known through their association with the Downtown Manhattan abstract expressionist painters as the New York School.

We see O'Hara most clearly in the early parts of the book. A New England Irish Catholic and parochial school upbringing is shown to be the oppressive breeding-ground for his rebellious attitude—one that grows more pronounced with his emergence from family into successive new worlds of the U.S. Navy, Harvard and graduate school in Ann Arbor, each a fresh stage for the assertion of hard-won personal and artistic freedoms.

Freedom is in fact the key theme in Gooch's portrait of O'Hara. "Born in pain," the poet would one day melodramatically close a long autobiographical poem about growing up, "he will be the wings of an extraordinary liberty."

Gooch traces O'Hara's decisive rejection of the faith of his childhood to a traumatic experience of Catholic mourning rites at the death of his father, which occurred when the high-strung, creative young man was an 18-year-old Harvard freshman.

Turning away from the Church's harsh view of death, sin and the hereafter would mean for O'Hara a compensatory embracing of life, and all the confusion and complication that came with it. One might say he summed up this critical turning by ironically subverting the catechism definition of sanctifying grace in another of his best-known lines, "Grace to be born and live as variously as possible."

But ghosts of the poet's past were not so easily dispelled, suggests the biographer. The traumatic imprinting of those paternal funeral rites may have continued to haunt O'Hara in later years, when, as his friend the painter Grace Hartigan told Gooch, the poet seemed "overly conscious of death": he often appeared to be at once spurred toward life by it, and unconsciously seeking it.

This can be seen, as Gooch observes, in O'Hara's 1955 elegies on the premature death of the actor James Dean. Obviously identifying with Dean's persona—after seeing "East of Eden" he'd told a friend he noted in the Dean character much of himself, "a naughty boy wondering why he's different"—in these poems O'Hara made the actor a tragic figure of "pride/ and speed."

In Dean's early and violent demise, O'Hara may have found the objective correlative of his own self-destructive urges. His poems to the dead actor read now as eerie presages of his own fate.

Taking after his mother, a volatile, anxiety-prone, alcoholic woman who as the years went by became his nemesis—harder and harder for him to get along with even as he increasingly came to resemble her—O'Hara had a penchant for reckless plunges.

This risk-taking tendency came out with a vengeance once he got to New York in 1951. From that point, his romantic commitment to art and love, the two grand ideals in his life, became the only constant in an existence otherwise bewilderingly various.

A Christmas job at the Museum of Modern Art, selling postcards at the front desk so as to gain daily free entry to the museum's Matisse exhibit, eventually grew into a curatorship which O'Hara held until his death. Despite his obvious competence at the latter post, however, it was not easy for him to hold onto, his job security in time becoming compromised by an increasingly defiant public openness about his gay life style.

A frantic whirl of one-night stands

and hopelessly one-sided loves, the sexual promiscuity practised by O'Hara in his heyday may provoke moralistic reaction in some readers today. But Gooch is careful to point out that the poet's sexuality was at a deep level an expression of the same libertarian impulse that also drove him as an artist. If the poet was, as Gooch says, desperately "dedicated to the sexual hunt," it was also true, as O'Hara once told a close friend, that for him "there were reasons to be homosexual other than the sexual one, that he loved the freedom."

The alcoholism, neurotic anxiety, insecurity, depression, insomnia, and death-obsession that troubled O'Hara's later years will come as news to those taken by his reputation for casually tossing off his funny, urbane, boldly straight-from-the-heart "I do this I do that" poems. The famous nonchalance now looks to have been deceptive.

Brad Gooch reports those disturbing problems and symptoms candidly, and even suggests that O'Hara's shocking death, following his being struck down by a beach buggy on Fire Island, contained suicidal elements. But the inner turmoil that from this account was clearly afflicting the poet toward the end of his life, leaving him in one friend's view a "wreck" in his final days, remains in large part mysterious.

In this otherwise highly entertaining and readable book, Brad Gooch suggests the depths of a "hunted and haunted" O'Hara lurking nervously beneath the generous, civilized, witty external demeanor, but never quite sounds them.

—Tom Clark

GERARD RIZZA Regard for Junction

Spectacular Diseases, 1992, \$5 paper. Intro. by Bernadette Mayer.

Gerard Rizza's wonderful poems remind us that poetry is a science of the emotions in which each poet makes discoveries of the truth neither in harmony with nor contradicting those of his or her peers. These poems remind one that contemporary poetry seems to be about compression of language both away from and complementing the ways in which we normally speak and think. Thus his poems sound both natural and hypernatural to that part of the inner ear connection to brain that hears them as one reads them quietly to one-

self. They consummate a marriage of lyricism and language concerns, bringing to the fore the plusses of both while avoiding the minuses of either. They never gush in some romantic never-neverland as do the many poems derived from the emotional space of songs. Also, they manage their wonderful "language" compression without seeming labored or dry. Care has been taken here but the works produced are never Johnny-one-note obsessions with fashionable linguistic and philosophical concerns. These poems are "personal" in the best sense but refrain from clouding the procession of words with private information comprehensible only to a select few and intellectual games meant for a mental clique. The only sadness involved with their appearance one must confront is that Gerard Rizza died in April 1992 of AIDS. Thus the name of his press is especially unfortunate. But these poems are neither primarily nor even secondarily concerned with his deterioration. As far as I know, his press does not specialize in the printing of works by poets with diseases, spectacular or otherwise. As for what else needs to be said about the poems, a wonderful introduction by Bernadette Mayer precedes them in this volume. Here are two of Gerard's regards:

Sonnet

*me, at clear looks
he all human and sad time
be man of a kind passing
gentle conquest of pleated pants
purple gray and blond
what's coming at me in thin tie
I'm admittance, he is ringing as feathers*

*links feet and gift of the same
wanting and knowing as
cleaned by the sun a mouthful
smile at the cruel roof that
keeps us as dozens of us two
men in a leaning, a holding
then sway, wait to sit to write*

• • •

Dear Tender Heart,

*I'm here at the terminal again
allowing the wait its big head
rest 'cross my knees. What is
your pocket full of today?
Blumeal and biblical spices
in bundles stretch your young
hold. In case you are not
wondering, here are all these
monkeys to remind you not to*

*know a yellow thing and of
the yellow beat.*

*The slack old paper and candy
shack is gone from this side now,
replaced with a tighter
fit against the wall that
blocks the slams. Wave are
silent through the glass,
the boat too, banging dock;
failed radar of the high-
school coach whose name grew
to be boat. All unheard*

*I'm unmoved
Staten Island 12:15 noon
you must be tired at work
again, hiding the deep hope
to stop the dialogue and
brave the cold.*

—Tom Savage

KATIE YATES

Is It Happening?

Boog Literature, 1992, 14 pp.

In Katie Yates's long prose poem *Is It Happening?* one finds unrequited love when one's only having sex. Lovers are "united" only by their "weak desire to grasp things," and their "staggering through possible responses." One could see this poem as a female version of a "crisis-poem." To ask "Is It Happening?" is to ask "Do I Love?" If we feel we have to define love to know that we love, do we despair when we find any definition comes up short? Yates begins by trying various definitions of love on for size (not sighs—love is not treated sentimentally here, but sensuously and strenuously): love as rule, as risk, as reverberation, as an escape from the burning building of solitude into the fiery web of relationship. Is there anything beyond despair? Any way out that's also a way in? Or is the failure of the relationship encoded in the hopes and promises that began it? Or are we asking the wrong questions?

"DO I LOVE?" Love evolves; I am evolving; therefore I love...even though (or because) I left you. This "argument" is a synopsis of this book; it doesn't have to be logical to be beautiful. One of the delights of the book is the willfulness of the stance; it is often harder to see yourself as the one who left than as the one who's been left because then you must accept the responsibility for your own torment. We see her rigor, how harsh she is on herself, how she has to persecute and demonize herself to face another. The movement into horror in

the poem shows the severest skeptic that IT IS HAPPENING.

The climax comes at the halfway point when the poet first realizes that she "must leave." Then the poem moves to speak in generalities. The poet tries to make sense of what has happened. This is easier than to make sense of what is happening. The poet also tries to justify her leaving. Part of the crisis is that she feels she cannot leave unless she justifies it. Yet none of the "reasons" she proposes satisfy her. What would lead a weaker poet to despair or guilt leads Yates to give up on the search for justifications of her actions. I'm referring to the movement from "Look, truth complicates. I must leave," to "I've changed the story so I'm leaving."

The poet satirizes her ex-lover's attempt to explain his life in terms of an absence as well as his inability to really see the woman: "He sees her as a constitutive representation of himself. Always of himself." Taken out of context this may seem to be cheap feminist scolding, but the tone is earned here and the insight into his motives is balanced with her own: "Of course it is not possible to say what actually took place." By the end of the poem, the pernicious casuistry she found offensive in the interlocutor is no longer an issue. She's lyrically worked it out. The poem, through its severe and surprising turns (for instance, a tree left on an answering machine) has purged itself of the cycle of dependence that could only give the poet something to write about by threatening her autonomy. It's always difficult to explain yourself to someone you left, and it just gets you in deeper when you try to explain your problems to someone who has more in common with them than with what solves them.

She tries to break it to him (and us) gently. She tries to break it to herself gently too—for it's obvious she's ambivalent, as we see by the poem's ending: "Suddenly the winter is over and I am lonely for your drawings." But she gets out of that wistful nostalgia with an abrupt salutary gesture to the spirit of change and freedom that may demand more than she can live up to. It's a risk she's willing to take; even if one can't be free, one can at least be free writing about it: "I am afraid of what I want./ Accordingly, my poetry is realized." The only way it can happen is to doubt whether it happens.

—Chris Stroffolino

ETELVINA ASTRADA

**Libro de Mal Amor/
Book of Failed Love**

Tr. Edith Grossman, drawings by Antonio Lopez Garcia. Gas Station Editions, 1993, 93 pp., \$10.95 paper.

Reading "love" in a book's title may set off a reaction similar to "pink" in a line of poetry. Fortunately, Etelvina Astrada dispels passive skepticism by qualifying with the word "mal." Translator Edith Grossman's choice, the word "failed," functions as the summation of meanings—evil, harmful, pathological, imperfect, or just plain bad.

Numbering the poems of *Failed Love* sans chronology and locus, Astrada absolves them from personal narrative and historicity. Instead, remembrance transmogrifies from poem to poem into water/fire derived metaphors—"the remembered hour burning,/ a bouquet of ashes," (poem XV). Reminiscences about amorous experiences remain submerged in symbolic references from legend and myth. ("On the lost shore/ my entranced eyes/ waiting for Aphrodite/ on the crest of a wave.") Because Astrada has relied on megametaphors to tell us about our endangered species and planet in other poetry collections, the persona of these poems may be a deity or muse speaking, but even so, the reader finishes the book still speculating about its identity.

Astrada equates loss—loss of love, the pleasures of love and the unity between lovers—with emptiness ("I listen to my emptiness," XI). The person addressed in the poems and the thing that is "love" receive equal treatment in Poem XX:

*And the wind blew away the furrow,
and the seed did not enclose fruit.
Love,
incomplete without you,
stripped of plenitude.
A face hidden in its shroud.*

Astrada's poems suggest that the elusive state of love we seek is dysfunctional in our post-vanguard modernist society as it also really was in the era of romanticism. Whether then or now, as in the soaps, the idealization of transcendent experience within a patriarchal system of monolithic proportions has to end up in bad love. Taking this into consideration within the context of women who have written love poems

from antiquity to the present, we make associations, say with Sappho who longs for Anaktonria in "distant Sardis." Unlike



Sappho, Astrada's narrator longs not for an identified person, but for the persona of desire. Also, the cause of separation is not specified—typically a lover's quarrel, deceit or love gone bad—but rather, the poet positions the ocean/sea between the lovers to symbolize a void. Against their acts of love, the sea takes on the role of conspirator and enemy, "An ocean between us/...slowly eroding our union," (I). The only refuge, it seems, appears in poem V, "Nostalgia a hidden dwelling place."

Astrada's dominant theme relates to Christopher Lasch's theory of primary narcissism: "Narcissism...is the longing to be free from longing." Alphonsina Storni deals with the theme that is her title "Loneliness" but decides that it has less weight in the world than the feeling as it's manifested outside of herself. "I could send it [loneliness] rolling/ Like foolish fires:/ The electric lights would outshine them." Storni, Astrada's Argentine precursor, was born at sea, and walked into it to die, but not into oblivion.

Etelvina Astrada was born in Freiburg, Germany in 1930, and raised

in Argentina. Astrada's mother translated Rainer Maria Rilke into Spanish. Her father, who studied with Martin Heidegger, was an internationally known scholar and philosopher. In 1975, she went into exile and has lived in Madrid ever since. St. Mark's Poetry Project co-sponsored a 1984 poetry reading by Etelvina Astrada when she was in the U.S. on a reading tour for *Autobiography of a Trigger* (Spanish Literature Publications, South Carolina, 1984). A second book of translated poetry, *Sudden Death* (SLP, 1987) brought her back to the U.S. and now with the publication of *Book of Failed Love*, Astrada will return for a reading tour in the late fall.

Enhancing the *Book of Failed Love* are aphoristic drawings by Antonio Lopez Garcia, "the greatest realist artist alive," according to Robert Hughes. Garcia easily accepts the mantle, the stigma, and the challenge of painting within that tradition. The drawings entrust the viewer with "a very open interpretation, a confrontation with reality, like a mirror, where there are no limits..." A Garcia portrait of a telephone is on the folded jacket, and inside the book are drawings of an infant's face transparent to a grid, a woman's torso and that of lovers in the



Not From the Radio

They would play
Conqueror, splinter
the conker
find a winner

Too hard for smash-ups

Walked against
the setting, the air

far from bodies of water, also the radio

Some mothers let their girls take trains and planes alone
They allowed these children to visit cockpits

An ideology of intuition, which could be found in the thistle
Which smelled of coal, which grew by railroad tracks

Sentence structure like the train time-table

—Alissa Quart

act, two sketches of a penis, a dog's head, sole of a foot, and even a bramble of winter branches. This "realism" resonates for the viewer who studies what is offered here.

Edith Grossman, noted for her translations of Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez' novels (*Love in the Time of Cholera* and *The General in His Labyrinth*), stays close to the text. The book designer is to receive his accolades too.

Los 8 Nombres de Picasso/ The Eight Names of Picasso, poems by Rafael Alberti with drawings by Picasso, Gas Station Editions's first book, established a precedent for matching great artists. *Libro de Mal Amor/Book of Failed Love* maintains the high standard, bringing together poems, translations and drawings that counterpoise the facile definitions we tend to tick off for reality, or real love—physical and aesthetic.

—Zoe Anglesey

JENNIFER CLEMENT

The Next Stranger

El Tucan de Virginia Press, Bilingual English-Spanish, 1993, 78 pp., \$13 paper.

As relationships grow old and regular, it's hard to remember that it all began in inspiration. *The Next Stranger*, a new book of poems by Jennifer Clement, continues to hear that call of the wild where dream relationships with fishermen and pirates contend with the "real" family around her. There's an air of Akhmatova's music as she tries to reconcile both circles. That Clement is caught between worlds may be due to her American upbringing in Mexico. "I felt a bit alien as a child in Mexico some 30 years ago," she recently said. "People would come all the way across the park to touch my hair."

Early in the book we learn that Clement shared the womb with a twin who died in childbirth. You get the feeling that she preserves her dialogue with her pirate and mystic fisherman in order to preserve that lost Piscean relationship, the whispers in the egg. She tells of her twin's hand grasping her ankle as she was lifted from the womb.

*...That frightened,
grasping hand I still feel under me
wherever I walk...*

The Pirate comes around frequently bringing a cruel and inspiring contempt for Clement's "real" life.

*All through my afternoons,
as the sun burns my cheeks
I feel him behind me
walking on the bones
of my shadow.*

Time and again, she finds the mysterious in relationships. Familial relationships with the otherworldly.

*...in some African places
women still marry trees...*

There's hardly a poem in the book that isn't addressed to one relationship or another. She watches somewhat sadly as her children emerge from early childhood's world of shadow, magic and possibility into the hard "facts" of life. She aches for the mystic camaraderie of her best friend Suzanne, far away in New York's "tower of concrete," lovers of an other world who knot sea shells in her hair and carry her off in fish nets.

Even a flirtation with an accountant is charged with the power of the unconscious. As his secret lover, she imagines herself a mermaid hiding in his closet from the serious business friends he has over for dinner.

*...you'd peek in and know you loved
me,
as I slept among your shoes,
in the darkness of your suits,
my fishtail wrapped around me.*

These poems, of people imagined, and the real people in her life, measure the distance between applied love and love imagined, the practicality of a daemon lover and the mystery of her son's first realization of mortality. The pacts, commitments, responsibilities and appointments on Tuesday make a hospital ward out of the bird-rich jungle of our initial fascinations. She struggles desperately to sustain the call of the wild that draws people together in the first place.

Clement, an American, lives in Mexico with her family: a husband and two children. She's a poetry activist in Mexico City and the founder and director of Tramontane, a group that promotes and publishes Mexican poetry and that is active in bringing U.S. poets to Mexico. Members of the group will read at St. Marks on May 9th. Jennifer Clement will read on October 11th.

—James Ruggia

GEORGE TYSH

Echolalia

United Artists, 1992, 76 pp., \$7 paper.

"Feminist party girls are/ women who like it." This paradoxical observation comes from a poem entitled "Reproductions" in George Tysh's new book, *Echolalia*. Tysh continues, "There is no feminism/ that can stand wholly outside femininity as it is posed/ in a given historical moment." If we operate on the premise, like Tysh, that all writing is paradoxical, then *Echolalia* speaks the unspeakable.

Echolalia is filled with images of ecstasy, yearnings for sexual fulfillment, and Detroit-style ideologies. Lewis Warsh, Tysh's publisher, simply calls it "George's sex book."

In the section titled "Reproductions," Tysh writes a 16 part poem called "Amanuensis." As I had no idea what this word means, and being an interested reader, I looked it up in a small pocket dictionary. "Amanuensis" means "a secretary, a writing slave." Very strange word. It's good that George never had one of those awful, Hemingway-inspired teachers who always insisted that you use the simplest word for what you mean.

"Amanuensis" was written (or compiled) by Tysh with quotations from individuals as diverse as Dashiell Hammett, Jacques Derrida, Kathy Acker, Brad Gooch, and Luce Irigaray. Interestingly, Bataille was not quoted directly—Tysh's work seems to derive much of its punch, of its soul, from Bataille's later work. Bataille's view of the "sacred," those objects subject to secrecy, silence or interdiction, seems to form the base for Tysh's work of exorcism, his attempt to de-control. In the preface to the second edition of "The Impossible," originally titled "The Hatred of Poetry," Bataille writes,

Realism gives me the impression of a mistake. Violence alone escapes the feeling of poverty of those realistic experiences. Only death and desire have the force that oppresses, that takes one's breath away. Only the extremism of desire and of death enables one to attain the truth.

Echolalia derives much of its power from this searching for the truth, which some writers try to disguise or sublimate because the act of searching for the

truth is so bald, so imposing, so removed from everyday existence, that to attempt to draw nearer to the truth becomes an act of courage, of blind faith. In searching for truth among metaphors of perversity, in the recesses of a rampant sexuality, Tysh exposes our deepest desires, our most forbidden fantasies, our electrifying fears. He does so in a language that embraces formality in all its awkward valor, in all its constrictive grace.

"Yourself," a poem from "Reproductions," feverishly written by an ambiguously sexualized narrator, plays with language on two planes—the poeticized and the analytical. He writes:

Yourself is one-handed. In clean socks on soft rug the citizen reads from necessity, one hand playing lightly: rub until wet, then moisten with spit the tongue of plain facts driven from thought. X. maintains a workbench in this moment of ambiguity. Who do you love?

Who indeed? Tysh ends this poem with the startlingly honest "Who loves to eat the shadows of the depths of your ass?" Of course, taking this question literally removes the reader from the act of entering the realm of the "sacred," which is not Tysh's intention. He wants to saturate the reader with this other world, this nether world of pure truth and deep psyche.

Tysh is sexual, he is precise, he writes with the intensity of one who would lie, cheat or steal to capture the exquisite objects of his desire. The taunt of the first poem, "Proposition," is Everywoman's dream:

The hard-on will be any length desired.

This poem sets the reader up to enter a world where fetishes, orgies—sublimated or imagined—emerging from fantasies or realities from the far corners of our minds—are presented in lyric song, in verse which vibrates much louder than any dildo.

In part 2 of "His Dick," Tysh's language evokes a sense of red curtains and thick heat, and he is serving up what Ted Berrigan asked for in one of his Sonnets: "Bring me red demented rooms, / warm and delicate words." Tysh writes:

*An excited and highly distempered ideality
threw a sulphurous lustre over all*

*making use of and in
turn used by the other.*

*I go out with a dead
woman
under the city in the night
since I am her very last contact with
life
our troubled relationship is a little stiff
but no words pass between us
and this throws us back upon the physical
which is all we really have or want.*

There is humor in Tysh's work, as in "our troubled relationship is a little stiff," which qualifies him for inclusion in "1001 Sex Jokes For Teens." The obscure humor is not typical of Tysh, but is refreshing. It shows that Tysh does not fall into the trap of taking oneself too seriously, hallmark of the ponderously boring. What more can I say?

Buy this book, keep it under your mattress, and read from it late in the night after your lover has fallen asleep.

(Available direct from United Artists, Box 2616, Peter Stuyvesant Station, NYC 10009)

—Marcella Harb

THOMAS FINK

The Poetry of David Shapiro

Fairleigh Dickinson, 1993, 123 pp.

David Shapiro's poetry, according to Thomas Fink's *The Poetry of David Shapiro*, exemplifies a model of "thresholds of reading." In other words, Shapiro constantly calls the reader's attention to the reading process by writing a skillfully nuanced poetry that is balanced between mimesis and antimimesis, thematic representation and sharp disjunction. Fink points out that the composition of such a border poetry, of which Shapiro is perhaps the chief practitioner, requires more than not making sense. Fink argues that Shapiro's poetry cleans up the mess of its problematizations of signification more effectively than either O'Hara's or Ashbery's. Shapiro comes closer to creating a sheet of interconnective polysemy, and Shapiro's poems are more continuous in tone than Ashbery's disjointed work of the late fifties and the early sixties. Yet his work is equally successful in avoiding thematization.

Hence, Fink says that Shapiro is a figure who must be read by anyone who is



interested in the "Language" poets from the seventies to the present because Shapiro predates them by some fifteen years. Such an examina-

tion will disclose that Shapiro pioneers a rich language poetry that keeps its edge by owning up to an implicit responsiveness to and responsibility for its poetic effects and connotations. Shapiro stays close to both a sense of language as a material and language as a promise to represent objects of desire. However, these representations and desires are always adjuncts to what one might consider "good" writing, that is writing which is ingeniously true to its medium. In this manner, our understandings, feelings, and emotions are trued through poetry.

One of the more useful aspects of this book is Fink's demonstration of how Shapiro's erotic poetry helps to remove walls of gender hierarchy. Language is inherently erotic because, according to a Lacanian model that Fink employs, both language and erotic love are motivated and organized by lacks. This lack applies to male sexuality as well as to female sexuality. In this light, Fink scrutinizes such Shapiro tropes as "Plunging like an elevator into an envelope," from the poem "You Are Tall and Thin." Shapiro's poetry may not be easily thematized but

Chance

Do I have to be sliced up to
make chance possible?
Was I sliced up in 1953? 52?
Chance fills in the credibility.
But I am chance
Chance is will,
the subversion of chance
Is chance and will.
There's a wall of chance
On the moment
Which is a wave
Capped by a collapsing wall.
I have mined the wave
For the chance within me—
the lottery in my guts,
the big mother, the sense.

—Stephen Paul Miller

it nevertheless instructs, delights, and moves.

Fink is not content to consign Shapiro's poetry to an overly simple zone of meaninglessness. The critic's rigorously close readings untangle Shapiro's revisions of Stevens. As with Stevens, Shapiro's idealism flows from his skepticism. In Shapiro's words, both poets "doubt the doubts." They employ what they do not know and have no power over and are simultaneously adventurous and self-effacing. Fink shows that Shapiro rigorously attains an unforced idealism by using wild inter-contextualizations of language to effect a paradoxically liberating sense of unattainable aspiration. "Venetian Blinds," for instance, can be read as a postmodern prayer:

*I have been leading the new life away
from you.*

*Or, I have been leading the new life,
but away from you.*

*If I could I would plagiarize from
music, for instance.*

*Also I would send you pure tones or
defend a form to try to live*

*Or trick and manage you as if you had
been asleep.*

*It is a criticism of life or a criticism of
death more exactly.*

*Whistler and Mallarmé's correspon-
dence has not been translated*

*But when it is, you will note "my Mal-
larmé" as an expression.*

*One might call it tracing a hyacinth,
or traces of a hyacinth.*

Like traces on a blackboard.

*Or tracing the window from a neoclas-
sicism upon a blackboard.*

These days that might as well not exist.

*Amerikanische Lyrik, orange and red
and yellow green.*

*Blind and sleeping and angry nonimi-
tations, flowers.*

*I could not draw, so I sketched this
soundless one of hopelessness.*

Between lives occur lamps.

—Stephen Paul Miller



ANTHONY HECHT

**The Hidden Law: The Poetry of
W.H. Auden**

Harvard, 1993, 484 pp., \$35 cloth.

Of course, there are reasons to read a book of poetry analysis other than

for the analysis itself. I did not expect to find a new poetics fully apparent or even partial in Anthony Hecht's *The Hidden Law*, nor was I expecting to get away with knowing better the poems discussed therein. Hecht is an adroit critic and, being a poet, he is a delightful performer; throughout the text his readings of the Auden he prefers (some of the earliest poems; the commonly anthologized ones like "Musée des Beaux Arts"; *Letter to Lord Byron*, *New Year Letter*, *For the Time Being*; parts of *The Orators*; the theatrical collaborations with Christopher Isherwood; the table-talk; poems from *On This Island*, *Another Time*, *Nones*, and *The Shield of Achilles*—but not *The Sea and the Mirror*, *The Age of Anxiety*, *Thanksgiving for a Habitat*, "At the Grave of Henry James," "Dame Kind," "Jumbled in the common box," many others) he impresses us with his strength of classical reference, his fondness for rubble, his avoidance of rubbish. He writes knowingly of the whole Western culture vegetable as did Auden, who read vastly. Always, he trusts Auden. He trusts him enough not to ruin any single reading of a poem with finality, and it is refreshing, the way Hecht defers from what he calls (but in a different context) a writer's "pretensions to ultimate statements."

Similarly, he trusts Auden enough to search for a sensible confidence not contrary to, nor certainly ignorant of, his precise, public doctrine. As the book's title promises, Hecht believes in and searches for a priority of thought developing and ancient within the poet, which doesn't neatly encompass the Marxism, psychoanalysis, genre-borrowing, and Christianity, on the one hand, and personal revisionism, on the other, but which provides a continuity of creative action and supports the poet against accusations of posturing, fancy, failure, and doubt. Therefore, what is said by Auden is neither true nor false but evidence of an inner condition which Auden himself might not, in fact, be conscious of at the time.

In the final chapter, Hecht claims (retroactively) Auden's language, his idea of the hero, and his notion of the frivolity of art as uniting themes for the book. These "themes" are not so much the objects of investigation as its means, and, while each of the three devices appears with regularity, none has greater urgency than the various other frequent vectors of approach. Auden

was successful as an essayist, editor, playwright, traveller, talker, friend, celebrity, librettist, and host. Furthermore, like his biography, his poems are notably populous; and in these distinctions more so than in his three "themes," Hecht finds a diverse and skillfully valid methodology for examining the poetry.

Here is an itinerary of one of his more tortuous readings, taken from the final chapter, in which Hecht at last tries to specify what he means by the title of the book. Moving from the epilogue of Yeats' *A Vision*, he begins to discuss the epilogue to *The Orators*, "O where are you going?"—which he compares to "Journey of the Magi." Concurrently he quotes an anecdote from Peter Ackroyd's Eliot biography, a portion of a review of Eliot by Edmund Wilson, speculates on the age of the Magus in the poem and on its "deeply personal meaning for Eliot himself." Then he quotes "The Cutty Wren," ballad-source for Auden's epilogue, a version of which the poet included in his *Oxford Book of Light Verse*. Hecht explains the title ("Cutty" means small, short, abbreviated, and is also a vernacular word for the wren itself.) and finds in the folk poem echoes of pagan fertility rituals. Then, using evidence from Frazer, he explicates the poem as a subsumed Christ narrative and, switching paragraphs, cites Christopher Isherwood on Auden's "high Anglican upbringing"—by which point a large corpus of loosely related information has gathered to press fiercely upon the reader's curiosity. That only a few sentences remain until the end of the book adds an emergency of solution to our need for definite closure. Hecht writes:

What I am trying to suggest is that Auden modeled his epilogue to The Orators, a nominally secular poem that concluded a genuinely secular work, on a poem whose Christian import cannot be unconscious of any Christian belief, so that the Hidden Law was, as far as we can, or could, judge, truly hidden from him. By the time he assembled the Oxford Book of Light Verse he was at least prepared to let perceptive readers discover a source of his epilogue, and thereby to acknowledge the Hidden Law within it.

Elsewhere in the book, Hecht is capable of equally smart and informative, though smaller, diversions. A remark on Auden's poor eyesight and consequent

preference for art criticism over actual paintings becomes the basis for speculation on the written rather than painted sources for a well-known Auden poem about Breughel's well-known Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. (And where *The Hidden Law* is less satisfying, at least for me, is in its preservation of such "well-knowns." I would have liked for Hecht to have discussed fewer of the proven works—and to have visited more carefully the allegorical regions he describes as "not wholly successful." But I suppose I'm asking for a quite different book.) Discussing Lord Byron, Hecht (for three pages) makes much of Auden's long term association of Don Giovanni and Tristan as symptomatic but opposite male types—Auden has written, for instance: "Hardly a week passes without Bertie Wooster thinking he has at last met The Girl; for a week he imagines he is her Tristan, but the next week he has forgotten her as completely as Don Giovanni forgets" (in *Balam and His Ass*)—but their relevance and tension are not limited to Auden's meaning alone. By accident and transumption they inhabit the oppositional structure of Hecht's writing and, I believe, can clarify our idea of Hecht as a critic.

Early on he claims that the critic is "a code-breaker... whose sustaining energy derives from the conviction, not always justified, that he has rent the veil and seen to the heart of the mystery," but, I suspect, his practical critic, in seeing the heart, misses (in both senses) the mystery. More probably, the cryptographer is Randall Jarrell, to whom Hecht opposes himself in the first chapter. After all, it is Jarrell who "isolates" and "identifies" Auden's language ("constant parataxis, ungrammatical" is an observation Hecht wouldn't care to write), admires Auden and imitates him but then turns on him and abandons all critical commitment. Conversely, Hecht is fair in his reading—and, moreover, he is

faithful. He has "had the pleasure of reading Auden's poetry for all my mature life" and, consequently, lacks the code-breaker's necessary suspicion.

Of course, a certain deviousness is not always bad, and I certainly enjoy the difference when an argument reinvents its obstacles without reaching any fine instance of closure. This is not, however, a directly negative criticism of Hecht but an acknowledgment of the post-interpretive passion which he (because of an old-fashioned formalism that precludes current theories of reading) has chosen to disregard. Fortunately, the decision does not harm for the most part the high quality of his readings. They are, as I've said, versatile and broad—even if they are not especially self-aware.

—Jonathan Bass

FAIRFIELD PORTER
Art in Its Own Terms; Selected Criticism 1935-1975

Zoland, 1993. 288 pp., \$10.95 paper.

I've always liked Frank O'Hara's lines to a critic:

*I cannot possibly think of you
 other than you are: the assassin*

*of my orchards. You lurk there
 in the shadows, meting out*

*conversation like Eve's first
 confusion between penises and*

*snakes. Oh be droll, be jolly
 and be temperate! Do not*

*frighten me more than you
 have to! I must live forever.*

Granted, O'Hara was addressing a literary critic. But criticism, as they say, is criticism. We might disagree about who or what is to live forever, the artist or the art; but it's hard not to find O'Hara's stance appropriate. Fairfield Porter is a lot better known these days as a painter than as a critic, though he wrote criticism on a fairly regular basis for 40 years, including a weekly art column for *The Nation*. As a critic, Porter is a singular, striking exception to



O'Hara's rule. Porter brought to his writing a rare combination of talents and interests. He studied philosophy with Whitehead at Harvard

and was interested also in the writings of Suzanne Langer, taking over ideas about the particularity of art from both. In addition to his passion for painting, he paid a good deal of attention to poetry. Well known for his blunt manner, he made this bluntness a virtue in his writing, saying only what he felt it necessary to say, refusing to "mete out conversation." Unlike so many aestheticians and theorists on the one hand and art writers on the other, he was at once a supremely attentive viewer and a clear, independent and provocative thinker, responding directly and intuitively to individual works and frequently going on to formulate issues and implications in the widest terms—aesthetic, scientific, social, political. Rarest of all, his prose is not merely clear and precise but frequently beautiful.

Porter's interests as a reviewer and essayist cut across conventional boundaries. A figurative painter and one of the best, he was excited by abstraction he felt had vitality and dismayed by figurative painting that didn't. Though he had clear favorites among artists (Vuillard, Cornell, de Kooning), his thoughtful reviews range illuminatingly across a large body of the painting and sculpture of his time. His early interests in socialism and communism found their way into various pieces. If he found something he thought genuine he praised it; if not, he didn't pull his punch. What invariably provoked his disapproval, in and out of art, was what smacked of system or "scientific method"—the elevation of rules, concepts and categories above direct experience, a misguided approach he felt to be limiting and ultimately destructive of the uniqueness (inevitable arbitrariness, surprise, mystery) of both art and life. Rackstraw Downes, in his excellent introduction, narrates an incident that made an early impression on Porter. Porter having introduced the critic Clement Greenberg to de Kooning, Greenberg promptly scolded de Kooning for continuing to paint figuratively. De Kooning's reaction was, "He wanted to be my boss, without pay." Porter concluded, "If that's what he [Greenberg] says, I think I will do just exactly what he says I can't do!" To

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Porter's independent, humanist way of thinking, intellectual bosses (especially idea-oriented, prescriptive—and proscriptive—critics) were the enemy.

Porter's method, by contrast, was to direct as much thoughtful attention to his subject as he could. The critic's obligation was to discover why and how the work succeeded or failed, in what its vitality (or lack of it) lay. None of this precluded formulating issues and implications, or making connections: Technology and Artistic Perception, Intellect and Comedy, Reality and the Museum, etc. Many of the short reviews move well beyond their occasions. One might say that Porter's motto for things intellectual (following William Carlos Williams' famous phrase "no ideas but in things") is, no ideas but in some necessary and non-degrading relationship to particulars. His aim was to appreciate, understand when necessary (understanding and interpretation—except by analogy—do not constitute the critical enterprise), remonstrate thoughtfully and convincingly. His values come out loud and clear.

Art in Its Own Terms is a stimulating but moreover an inspiring book: it makes one want to rush out to galleries (despite their currently dismal state) and it makes me want to write criticism. When did that last happen? I can think of a dozen undergraduate and graduate courses where the collection should be required reading. In addition to the virtues of his prose, Porter's integrity as a thinker and the very quality of his attention are moving. Where his dislikes seem oddly pronounced, as for example in his negative remarks about Cezanne (or the Bauhaus or Constructivism or earthworks), they remain consonant with his consistently displayed values. No judgment or idea is dashed off yet nothing is belabored. Porter's short reviews show as much care and thought

Code Poem from the International Code of Signals

EBTIN	is freight paid
TOW	is there any freight obtainable for place indicated
WIZ	frightened
WOG	from
EBACX	for them their
HEX	obscure
ZSY	first
WEHEK	mooring buoy
TLA	civil airdrome at
EGPEL	having
DUBAP	fat
DUHGO	female
EDABD	glad
ESPLO	life ves

the code of symbolization
 now who dictatee aunt hannee
 fe with assistance no name sir paw
 silent teachers maw

—Hannah Weiner

as the longer pieces; among many others, those of the painters Albert York and Jon Schueler (barely half a page) are worth other critics' entire books.

This collection is a reprint, its original publication (Taplinger) having been in 1979, four years after Porter died. Both, needless to say, small presses. What, one can't help wondering, would Porter make of current fashions in criticism and above? My guess is that he would have a hard time thinking about the practitioners in other than Frank O'Hara's terms. How many of those who write with some connection to art or literature are genuinely appreciative, straightforward, unconfusing, "frightening" only where there is no alternative, temperate—let alone jolly or droll?

With so much lately in the air about "completing" the work of the artist, it is Porter, it seems to me, who adds to the complex of art experience in the best and healthiest way, writing a richly human criticism that engages many concerns of artists and writers both.

Two or three items by way of footnote. 1) It's hard to imagine a better editor of Porter's prose than Rackstraw Downes, who in addition to being a wonderful painter himself shares many of Porter's values and critical strengths. 2) This being the *Poetry Project Newsletter*, it seems only mildly irrelevant to mention that Porter, in addition to being a painter and critic, wrote poems, was married to the poet Anne Channing, for an extended period housed the poet James Schuyler, and wrote prose, dare I say it, with a poet's strengths. His piece on "Poets and Painters in Collaboration" contains illuminating, early appreciations of O'Hara, Schuyler, Koch and Ashbery. 3) One of Wallace Stevens' aphoristic "Adagia": "To a large extent, the problems of poets are the problems of painters and poets must often turn to the literature of painting for a discussion of their own problems." Not very often with beneficial results, but certainly here.

—Charles North

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